

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was one of the greatest philosophers in western history. His critiques of the French education and political systems have become classics for the comprehensive solutions they proposed. In particular, his concept of the “general will” in politics and society has been used widely by modern politicians to condone any number of actions. The following entry is designed to give you more in-depth information about this famous philosopher. After a brief biography, several sections on Rousseau’s main works are offered to familiarize you with his ideas.

Biography

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born to a middle-class family in Geneva, which was, at the time, an independent Calvinist republic in association with the Swiss Confederacy. Rousseau’s mother died shortly after his birth, and his father left when he was ten. An uncle brought up Jean-Jacques and his older brother, but at the age of fifteen or sixteen the younger Rousseau ran away after enduring a series of abusive apprenticeships.

Rousseau’s decision to depart Geneva marked the beginning of a lifetime of wanderings. He took odd jobs in Turin and Savoy before meeting Madame Louise de Warens, then 29 and newly divorced from her husband. Madame de Warens acted as Rousseau’s mentor, and, for a time, his lover, but most importantly for Rousseau’s future development, she gave him a place to educate himself.

Rousseau stayed at de Warens’ residence at Chambéry for four years before travelling to Paris in 1742. Like many other aspiring intellectuals at the time, Rousseau hoped to find success in the cafes and salons of Paris, which was rapidly becoming a center of European Enlightenment thought. He worked as a secretary and attempted to start a satirical journal, but enjoyed little success. He later asserted in his autobiography that the turning-point in his career came about as the result of an epiphany—a conversion experience, if you will—that he had after visiting the French philosophe Denis Diderot in prison in 1749. In 1751 his *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* won a major prize and was talked about in royal courts across Europe, marking the beginning of Rousseau’s rise to fame.

The prize, and Rousseau’s subsequent acclaim, allowed him to support his writing projects without relying on wealthy patrons. He relished his newfound independence, but his fondness for autonomy led him to be increasingly touchy about what he saw as others’ attempts to control him. He eventually married Thérèse Lavasseur, an uneducated maid who he had known for many years. Rousseau’s prickliness lost them many friends, however, and in 1757 was a reason for him and Thérèse to move to another part of France. Rousseau wrote eloquently about virtue and right conduct but was often unable to follow his precepts.

After falling out with most of his friends in 1757, Rousseau moved with Thérèse to Montmorency, where he completed his two most influential works: *Émile* and *The Social Contract*. The works challenged the French education system and political system respectively, and soon the repressive regime put out a warrant for Rousseau’s

arrest. He fled to Neuchâtel, which was controlled by the Prussian king, Frederick the Great. As Rousseau's books were banned in France, he had them printed in the Netherlands. He later travelled to England on the invitation of Scottish philosopher David Hume, only returning to France late in his life and living under a false name.

Rousseau was not merely a good writer. He was a botanist of some acclaim, and one of his first endeavors was to build a musical counting device. He was also eccentric; at various points in his life, he believed that there was a conspiracy to ruin him. He and Thérèse had five children together, but they gave all of them away; though he wrote about the importance of family life, he never undertook to raise children himself.

Much of what we know about Rousseau comes from his autobiography, *Confessions*, which was published four years after his death. Its title evokes the autobiography of St. Augustine of Hippo; Rousseau, like Augustine, wrote openly about his doubts, his guilt, and his failings. Rousseau also wrote *Confessions* to defend himself against the accusations of subversion that justified the French state's banning of *Émile* and *The Social Contract*.

Émile

Rousseau wrote *Émile* in 1762, shortly after which it was banned. The book challenged the dominion of the clergy in education as well as their methods in providing instruction. *Émile* imparts Rousseau's philosophy of education through the experiences of the title character, a young boy. Tellingly, the boy's tutor is named Jean-Jacques who, at the end of the book, declares himself to be the boy's "true" father because of his role in educating *Émile*. Despite the book's initial difficulties with French authorities, Rousseau nonetheless reached a large audience by having the book printed in the Netherlands. Eventually, Rousseau won a small victory over the *ancien régime*; *Émile* became the basis for the new French education system after the French Revolution in 1789. However, Rousseau's work still attracted much criticism, in particular from women who were angered by his belief that women should merely be educated for a life in the home.

Rousseau was not the only Enlightenment philosophe to propose changes to the French system of education, but the changes he proposed were the most radical and far-reaching. Rousseau articulated a philosophy of education that imagined the transformative potential of education for society: properly educated pupils would be able to create a new society that eliminated the centuries-long cycle of poverty, inequality, and exploitation against which Rousseau wrote. The changes that other eighteenth-century thinkers proposed, in contrast, merely changed the focus of education: rather than imparting aristocratic values, such changes imparted bourgeois values. Philosophes like Priestly in England and Helvétius in France, relying on Locke, argued that a child's mind was a blank slate on which should be printed the skills and values necessary to succeed in society. Rousseau also adopted Locke's blank slate—or *tabula rasa*—theory, but he believed that contemporary values must be left behind entirely.

Accordingly, the first educational challenge that Rousseau tackled was how to raise Émile to be a man in society. Rousseau was adamant in his belief that society was corrupt in general, so the boy's preparation for society should take place outside of society for as long as possible. Not even the parents were removed enough to ensure such a pure environment. Therefore, the ideal instructor is the tutor, Jean-Jacques.

Rousseau also argued that education should be natural; it should be spontaneous and not forced upon the student. Rather than educating the pupil directly, the tutor should choose situations in which the pupil can educate himself. Rousseau believed that it was vital for the tutor to choose those situations because, if the child had no direction, he would be just as likely to explore something corrupt as something good.

Rousseau's concept of a "natural" education further included the necessity for children to learn the limits of nature itself. He argued, for instance, it is better for a child to understand "there is no more" than "you cannot have any more"; the first is a natural limitation and the second is artificial. Additionally, Rousseau believed children should be active outside, and any injuries they might receive were part of learning about their physical limitations.

Eventually, however, the child must grow up and separate from the tutor. Rousseau believed the separation should happen around the age of sixteen; at this age, the boy must enter society and can look for a wife. The terms of the boy's separation from his tutor, however, are reminiscent of the power relations in *The Social Contract*—which is discussed further below. Much like the free citizen in *The Social Contract*, who trusts the state to act in his or her best interest, Émile places himself under his tutor's protection and asks that the tutor keep him on the right path, even though he has learned how to act completely. Under his auspices, the tutor Jean-Jacques introduces Émile to his bride, Sophie, and then sends Émile abroad to experience other cultures. The boy's travels are intended to further his education, as such experiences would expose him to other perspectives.

Most of *Émile* is devoted to Rousseau's prescriptions for the education of boys; only at the end of the book does Rousseau turn to the education of girls. In Rousseau's conception, both the general and specific educational needs were different for boys and girls. Boys learned about things and ideas and were, therefore, to be removed from the corrupting influence of society for as long as possible. Girls, however, were to learn about people and religion and, particularly, to develop sensitivity to the emotions and needs of others so they could best serve their husbands. They necessarily are not supposed to shape a future society but to conform with contemporary values—exactly what Rousseau opposed in the education of boys. Moreover, girls were to be taught to be false; Rousseau believed this to be part of female nature, but this is also a marked contrast to the education of Émile, who was taught to be honest always. It is strange that Rousseau, who believed the ideas of his world were corrupt and incorrect, essentially parroted the common wisdom about women. He believed that women should play a separate and inferior role from men and that their education should, therefore and above all, help them to be supportive to their husbands.

*Rousseau's Political Philosophy*¹

Rousseau developed his political philosophy over the course of decades. The principle means in which he did so was through several books written between 1750 and 1762, of which *The Social Contract* is the most famous. Over the next few pages, we will outline Rousseau's political philosophy through his major works.

Discourse on the Arts and Sciences (1750)

Rousseau's *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* was his first major work and brought him to the attention of the French and European public. Shortly after his "conversion experience" in 1749, Rousseau decided to enter an essay-writing competition given by the Academy of Dijon. The competition stipulated that writers must answer "whether the re-establishment of the arts and sciences has contributed to purifying morals." Rousseau sent his answer to the Academy in 1750, and in 1751 he was announced as the winner. Rousseau gained extensive notoriety as a result of his answer; the competition was watched widely, and his victory received responses from numerous dignitaries, including the king of Poland.

Rousseau's essay began his engagement with a theme that would be the focus of the rest of his major writings: the corruptive influence of civilization on human beings. He argued, first of all, that progress and civilization were eroding the soul's virtue, and that the sciences and the arts were the main influence on this devolution. Rousseau's proposal ran counter to Enlightenment beliefs that progress in the sciences and the arts were good for individuals and for humanity.

Rousseau began by arguing that whenever the arts and the sciences flourished in a society, the society crumbled soon after. He drew on historical examples for those arguments: when art had flourished in China, ancient Egypt and, especially, ancient Greece, it marked a period of decline for those civilizations. He compared the decline of Athens, which had thoroughly embraced an artistic culture, with Sparta. Rousseau believed that the Spartans, with their military and utilitarian outlook on life, had embodied the proper sensibilities for the enrichment of the soul. Because the Spartans had purged artists and scientists from society, they had prospered. (He did not, however, put much stress on the fact that the Spartan civilization also perished.)

In the second half of his discourse, Rousseau attacked the nature of the arts and sciences themselves as degenerate. Neither, he argued, do anything to make people better citizens. One who understands the sciences is not necessarily a more virtuous person, merely a more knowledgeable person. Moreover, Rousseau argued that enjoyment of the arts creates a society in which people strive to be recognized and no longer value courage, temperance, or fraternity. In both cases, Rousseau argued that the arts and sciences do nothing to make someone a better citizen or a more virtuous person.

¹ The development of this section on Rousseau's political philosophy draws in particular on James Delaney, "Rousseau, Jean-Jacques," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2005), <http://www.iep.utm.edu/rousseau>.

Discourse on Inequality (1755)

Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men*, better known by the shorter title above or as Rousseau's *Second Discourse*, was again written in response to a question given by the Academy of Dijon. The Academy's question in 1754 was "what is the origin of inequality among men, and is it authorized by natural law?" This time Rousseau did not win first prize, partly because his essay was longer than the specified length, but he still published his text in 1755. It has become better known than his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*.

Rousseau began his project along much the same lines as John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*. Like Locke (and Thomas Hobbes), he argues that society is constructed, not natural. Rousseau's understanding of the natural state of man, however, differed from what Locke and Hobbes had argued. Rousseau argued against Hobbes's idea that life in a natural state was "nasty, brutish, and short." Such a belief, Rousseau argued, defined humans by only their negative characteristics. Rather, if humans were truly without all the structures and organizations of civilization, they would be shy and peaceful. Humans were not only capable of acting in their own self-interest (their self-love, or *amour de soi*), as Hobbes argued; rather, they also had a powerful capacity for pity and mercy. Other creatures share these qualities, but humans have evolved, Rousseau argued, because their capacity for reason exceeds that of any other creature. Since human nature includes this powerful capacity for mercy and reason, Rousseau optimistically proposed that cooperation, not conflict, was the natural state of human society.

Rousseau went on to articulate his theory of the development of civilization. The first stage involved temporary group organization, with attempts at developing language. Next came more permanent relationships, especially marriage and family relationships, which also brought with them rudimentary understandings of property and pride. While humans would still be basically happy at this stage, developments in the arts and sciences at the next stage created the setting for humanity's dissatisfaction. Here, Rousseau's *Second Discourse* hearkens back to his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* and its argument about the degenerate nature of civilization. With the introduction of the arts and sciences, people developed different skills, and a division of labor evolved: those with more valuable skills acquired more power in the society. Eventually, citizens who rise to the top of the division agree that everyone must be bound by a social contract; that all aspects of the society work together to reinforce the whole. Rousseau asserted, however, that this is a self-interested argument on the part of the new elites to secure their power. The people, failing to recognize that the social contract is a trap, accept it willingly.

Discourse on Political Economy (1755)

Rousseau's *Discourse on Political Economy* initially appeared in Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, but Rousseau published it himself as a separate volume in 1755. While Rousseau's previous discourses critiqued how civilization had developed, this discourse provided ideas on how to improve civilization. This work is important on those grounds,

but also because here Rousseau introduced the concept of the “general will,” which he would develop further in *The Social Contract* and is central to the understanding of Rousseau’s political philosophy.

The general will, Rousseau argued, is what is best for society. A society is made up of individuals with different skills and different desires but is also a group. The general will, therefore, looks after what is best for that entire group. Sometimes, however, the general will can come into conflict with the desires of one or several groups within society, so Rousseau articulated some general principles. The governing body of any society, in order to act virtuously, must always follow the general will and must make sure that it is in accordance with the individual will if at all possible.

Rousseau’s conception of the general will and the state relied on the articulation of human nature he developed in his *Second Discourse*—that man is innately good. It also again disputed Hobbes’s understanding of humanity. Rousseau argued that if any governing body acts according to the principles he set out—i.e., the general will acts in society’s best interest and in accordance with the individual will—the people will live virtuously and will have no trouble following the law because they trust the government to act on their behalf. Hobbes, however, viewed people more negatively: he believed that a government needed laws with harsh penalties because people would only obey the laws and act against their egotistical nature if the penalties were harsh enough to deter them.

The Social Contract (1762)

Rousseau’s *Social Contract* developed the themes he had worked on in his discourses of the 1750s to their fullest extent. This work can particularly be seen as a continuation of and an improvement upon the *Discourse on Political Economy*, as he again attempted to outline a vision for society. Rousseau also attempted to establish a social contract that differed from the corrupt social contract he criticized in his *Second Discourse*. *The Social Contract* differs from Rousseau’s earlier works in significant ways, however. While his *First* and *Second Discourses* were designed to answer particular questions, *The Social Contract* set out a more comprehensive vision for society. Unlike his first two discourses, *The Social Contract* was not written to win a prize but to give an honest assessment. Nonetheless, Rousseau’s skill as a writer is evident in the memorable first line: “Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains.” His famous statement derives from his theory of the division of labor and the resulting false social contract implemented on French society.

Rousseau further developed his concept of the general will from its gestation in his *Discourse on Political Economy*. In particular, he argued that the direction of the general will is legitimate for whomever holds true sovereignty. Sovereignty does not refer merely to whomever holds power, but to the person or governing body who truly acts in the interest of the general will. Moreover, sovereignty does not mean acting in the interest of the political body that governs a people, but acting in the interest of the people themselves. The general will, he continued, is always abstract because it refers to a group of people, while individual wills are often specific needs. Rousseau did not,

however, deal with the difficulties that often occur when reconciling the general will with the individual will or when what the people want differs from what is right for them.

Rousseau's *Social Contract* purports to free the people from their chains, but his concept of the general will evokes an idea of a controlling state that leaves no room for individuality. This seems like a contradiction, but in Rousseau's optimistic view of society it is not. A government, Rousseau argued, holds sovereignty when it acts to secure the freedom of the people it governs and make them relatively equal in economic matters. The people can trust the government to act in their favor, much as Émile trusted his tutor to act for his benefit. If the people do not upset this delicate balance between government and society, the government will not be forced to intervene on individual freedom.

Legacy

Rousseau's legacy is much disputed and as such it is difficult to characterize. His philosophy spawned many ideas and was used in many different ways; some were good and some were overwhelmingly bad. The concept of the general will can be widely applied, and a leader can argue that he or she acts on behalf of the general will with great positive or negative effects. Rousseau's influence has therefore been interpreted in two ways. First, he is seen as one of the founding philosophers of modern democracy because his works helped to inspire the French Revolution as well as the French attempts to establish a responsible republican government over the next century, which in turn influenced similar attempts across the world. Second, and quite conversely, Rousseau's theories have also been implicated in many of the most egregious examples of dictatorship and totalitarianism in history, including the reigns of Robespierre, Stalin, and Hitler, all of whom claimed to act (and likely believed that they were acting) for the good of their society. What is important to keep in mind is that Rousseau did not intend for his theories to be used in that way; while he perhaps should have been wiser to the potential for the misuse of his sweeping doctrines, he cannot be blamed for the actions of others decades, and sometimes centuries, after his death.

Rousseau has also had a great effect on a number of philosophers who have in turn been influential. Immanuel Kant, whose philosophy is part of the underpinnings of the European Union, developed his idea of the common good partly in conversation with Rousseau's general will. Karl Marx, moreover, drew heavily on Rousseau's political philosophy, while many other philosophers since have referred to or argued against Rousseau's principles, since they have become so central to political philosophy.

Summary

- Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a traveler; he rarely remained in one place for more than two decades of his life. The reasons for this varied: his family abandoned him; his friends abjured him for his paranoid conduct; and the French state sought his arrest for subversion, forcing him to flee.
- Rousseau's *Émile* attempted to establish a new standard of education based on a natural, self-directed style of learning. Rousseau believed that children should be

taught to discover the world in a number of safe, mostly self-directed settings, rather than by rote, as was the custom at the time.

- Rousseau's initial concern in the area of political philosophy revolved around the degradation of civilization. His *First Discourse* argued that the arts and sciences were corrupting human virtue, while his *Second Discourse* outlined how human society became based on a false social contract.
- Rousseau's next major works, his *Discourse on Political Economy* and *The Social Contract*, proffered his ideas for a proper social contract. In *Political Economy*, Rousseau introduced his idea that a society should be governed according to the general will, or what is best for the people as a whole.
- *The Social Contract* represents the pinnacle of Rousseau's theorizing; in this work, he set out a comprehensive vision for society and rounded out his idea of the general will.
- Rousseau's theories have been used widely over the past 250 years, both in the defense of democratic principles and in the propagation of murderous, totalitarian regimes. His influence is difficult to overstate.